

STATEMENT OF
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FOREST SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

regarding

ECOSYSTEM HEALTH ON THE MALHEUR NATIONAL FOREST
Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

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MADAM CHAIRMAN, MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss ecosystem health on the Malheur National Forest and other areas in eastern Oregon. I am Nancy Graybeal, the Acting Regional Forester for the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service. I am accompanied by F. Carl Pence, former Forest Supervisor of the Malheur National Forest, and Don Scott, Forest Service Entomologist for the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman, and Malheur National Forests.

There are three major items I would like to discuss today:

- 1) the Summit Fire on the Malheur National Forest;
- 2) the recently announced Blue Mountains Demonstration project; and,
- 3) ongoing restoration efforts for the ecosystems of eastern Oregon.

BACKGROUND

Forest health concerns are one of the primary issues facing the Forest Service in eastern Oregon. Eastern Oregon ecosystems are prime examples of the complex situation that has developed over the last 100 years as a result of fire suppression policies and past management practices. The recent occurrence of large fires and spread of insects and disease is symptomatic of ecosystems that are outside

the typical or normal range in terms of species composition and function, and these occurrences have drastically altered the landscape. We are faced with the challenge of restoring these ecosystems to healthy conditions that will protect sensitive habitats while producing a sustainable flow of resources. The present situation took a century to develop, and it will require time to restore.

SUMMIT FIRE AREA ON THE MALHEUR NATIONAL FOREST

The Summit Fire of August, 1996, is a good illustration of the complex challenges we face in dealing with forest health issues in eastern Oregon. The fire burned approximately 30,000 acres within the 127,000 acre Galena watershed. In August of 1997 a Final Environmental Impact Statement and a Record of Decision (ROD) were issued for fire recovery and salvage sale proposals. This ROD was withdrawn in December of 1997 due to issues raised in appeal, and a new ROD that addressed the appeal issues was signed in July of 1998. Ten timber sale contracts are in progress as a result of this decision, harvesting about 6,700 acres for approximately 50 million board feet of timber.

Western pine beetles had been building up in this area for at least 3 years prior to the Summit Fire. Following the fire, the pine beetles continued to attack weakened trees in and around the fire damaged area, attacking mature and over-mature trees. The most active infestation is confined to the fire area at this time. Areas outside the fire including non-Federal lands may not be susceptible as most of the stands are younger.

Adding complexity to the situation, in July, 1998, there was an unusual event where cyclonic winds hit a portion of the watershed, causing 300 acres of concentrated blowdown and 1,100 acres of scattered blowdown. Instead of continuing the piecemeal approach to management in this area, a watershed assessment for the entire Galena watershed was completed on June 30, 1999. An Environmental Impact Statement under the Blue Mountains Demonstration project will now be developed to analyze the proposals and recommendations in the watershed assessment. The challenge we face is balancing the protection of critical resources such as water quality, soils, and wildlife habitat, while also addressing forest pest conditions, hazardous fuels, and the desire to recover salvagable timber from the area. This must be done with full public involvement while complying with all existing environmental laws.

BLUE MOUNTAINS DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

On June 30, 1999, the Forest Service and the Oregon's Governor's Office made a joint announcement regarding the Blue Mountains Demonstration Project. This large-scale demonstration project covers over 2 million acres, targeting watersheds that are 200,000 to 500,000 acres in size. It will be used to demonstrate ecosystem restoration, fire risk reduction, and clean water protection. It differs from previous piecemeal programs by dealing with restoration over an entire watershed.

The project will demonstrate activities such as prescribed burning, commercial and precommercial thinning, riparian area planting and stream rehabilitation, maintenance, closure, and obliteration of roads, and noxious weed treatment and prevention methods. While not all of the site-specific projects have been identified yet, the Forest Service will work closely with the State, the Eastside Forest Advisory Panel, and the John Day/Snake Resource Advisory Council to assess and prioritize additional actions for the demonstration area.

For example, the Upper Grande Ronde Watershed Restoration Project, located on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, is part of the Blue Mountains Demonstration Project. The project is designed to target ecosystem health on a watershed scale, with proposed treatments that will include restoring fish habitat, improving the function of impacted wet meadows, reducing fuels, and thinning of upslope stands to retain snowpack longer. This project will harvest 7 million board feet of timber, precommercial thin 1,000 acres, prescribe burn about 2,750 acres, obliterate 17 miles of unneeded road, and restore 180 acres of meadow.

The Clear Creek project on the Malheur National Forest is within the upper Middle Fork of the John Day River watershed, and is also within the demonstration project area. This project is a model for implementing the Forest Service's Natural Resource Agenda. One of the criteria for the selection of the Blue Mountains as a demonstration area was that there were projects planned and ready to be implemented with all National Environmental Policy Act disclosure completed, which is the case for this project. Through this project the Forest Service has offered approximately 16 million board feet of sawlogs and fiber, and will treat 600 acres of forest severely affected by *Armillaria* root disease, and use prescribed fire on 2,100 acres to reduce fuels and restore ecosystem function and health.

The Forest Service has the capacity to facilitate more restoration work in the Blue Mountains. Projects on Forest Service lands in the demonstration project area will be funded by re-prioritizing regional funds, and through partnering if other Federal, State, and private landowners agree to work cooperatively.

ONGOING RESTORATION EFFORTS

The current eastern Oregon ecosystem health strategy, which is shared by State and other Federal agencies, utilizes existing forest plans as amended and the scientific analysis and information obtained from the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP). The Region is using watershed analysis to assess and deal with key restoration issues, and to prioritize at a large landscape scale. Community values and full public participation are an important part of that prioritization process.

ICBEMP provides the best opportunity to create a common vision for the long term management of Federal lands on the eastside of Oregon and other Interior Columbia Basin lands. The project is developing a scientifically sound and ecosystem-based strategy for the management of eastside forests and grasslands. It will help us provide sustainable levels of goods and services while ensuring sustainable populations of plant and animal species. A Final Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision for ICBEMP is anticipated in the spring of the year 2000.

The Forest Service is actively pursuing forest health work across eastern Oregon. For example, the Seven Buttes Project in the Deschutes National Forest covers over 100,000 acres. This effort has led to a major fire risk management effort. Treatments include thinning, prescribed fire, closing roads, and

loosening soils compacted by past activities. In addition to benefiting the forest, over thirty million board feet of wood will result from the understory thinning.

Through the Wallowa County local forest and economic health initiative, 36,000 dollars have been granted to stakeholders engaged in developing tools for forest health restoration and use of small diameter material for value-added manufacturing. In an effort to retool the industry, funds are also going to the Rogue Institute for Economy and Ecology to develop new product prototypes made from locally harvested, underutilized forest resources.

Accomplishments in eastern Oregon last year included the improvement or restoration of almost 287,000 acres of national forest lands through a variety of reforestation, fuels treatment, and habitat restoration activities and projects. Approximately 272 million board feet of timber was salvaged. Over the past decade, the program for fuels treatment has increased dramatically. For example, a decade ago, the Malheur National Forest treated 375 acres for fuels reduction. Last year they treated more than 31,700 acres.

The Forest Service is using a full range of tools to accomplish forest health work. In addition to existing program authorities and funding, the Forest Service has proposed an Ecosystem Restoration and Improvement line item in the fiscal year 2000 budget, which would enable us to focus treatments, such as noncommercial thinning, on lands where these treatments are required to restore and maintain watersheds and forest health.

SUMMARY

It is clear that restoring ecosystem health requires a significant investment. In the Blue Mountains the public debate over the values and uses of our national forests continues. There are common goals. Communities and the Forest Service want clean, safe drinking water and sustainable forests and grasslands. There are also no simple solutions. I am excited about the opportunities that will be explored with the Blue Mountains Demonstration Project, and look forward to addressing the challenges of large-scale ecosystem management with the State and local citizens.

This concludes my testimony. I will be pleased to answer any questions you or the subcommittee may have.